
Chinese
Literature
Essays
Articles
Reviews




Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts: Stories and Essays, by Qian Zhongshu. Edited by Christopher G. Rea. Translated by Christopher Rea, et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Pp. 272. US$89.50 (cloth), $29.50 (paper).

I still remember reading in 1985 the Modern Language Association's announcement of elected honorary members, in which the name of Qian Zhongshu in *pinyin* was not only impossible for many to pronounce, but also impossible to print, for it came out as *Quian* Zhongshu—it was simply impossible for the typesetter to put down a *q* without following up with a *u*. Nobody reading the MLA announcement, however, would have any trouble recognizing the names of the other honorary members elected in the same year—Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Gérard Genette, Wolfgang Iser, and Robert Weimann. It was to MLA's credit that as early as 1985, it had already recognized the importance of Qian Zhongshu as arguably the most erudite modern Chinese scholar and writer and bestowed on him the prestige of honorary membership, but the misspelling of Qian's name was also an indication of how little his name and works were known at the time in the US and the Western world, even among scholars in literary studies. Hopefully things have improved since then. In addition to such earlier translations as Jeanne Kelly and Nathan Mao's rendition of Qian's novel *Weichang* or *Fortress Besieged*, published in 1979 by Indiana University Press, Ronald Egan had selected some 65 passages from Qian's magnum opus, *Guan zhui bian*, and published his excellent translation as *Limited Views* in 1998 with Harvard. It is thus most welcome that now we have a new English translation of Qian Zhongshu's essays and short stories, *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts*, edited and largely translated by Christopher Rea and brought out by Columbia University Press in 2011. With this new publication, we hope to see Qian's works more readily available, and more widely read and appreciated.

This new book includes English translation of Qian Zhongshu's early literary prose written in an elegant modern vernacular as opposed to his critical works written in classical Chinese. These prose works were originally published in two collections, 寫在人生邊上 (*Written in the Margins of Life*, 1941) and 人獸鬼 (*Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts*, 1946), and jointly reissued with the author's minor revisions in 1983; these form the basis for this translation. Rea's introduction provides some helpful background information about the author and the time when these works were written, and he describes them as an "iconoclastic commentary on one of the most tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history" (p. 1), "a sustained testing of the possibilities and limitations of language by a critically minded writer with an unparalleled linguistic repertoire and a spirit of fierce intellectual independence" (pp. 1-2). That fiercely independent spirit arose from a remarkably wide range of knowledge that Qian acquired in both classical Chinese and Western traditions, and his command of several European languages in addition to his mastery of classical Chinese. Given such an extraordinary height of knowledge and erudition, his view is unusually broad and his perspective extraordinarily wide, from which no single

tradition would appear unique or superior, and no provincial horizon satisfying. Because he had read so much beyond the limitations of one language and culture, Qian's writings, as Rea remarks, display a genuine "literary cosmopolitanism." Copious citations from works in both Chinese and European languages became "a hallmark of Qian's discursive style" (p. 4). Another characteristic of Qian's writings that resulted from his "spirit of fierce intellectual independence" and his enormous learning is the deeply satiric mode of expression that looks at human frailties from a moral and intellectual height, from which all stupidity, pretentiousness, hypocrisy, and petty-mindedness are exposed to devastating laughter. Almost all the pieces included in this book show the author's wonderful sense of humor, often expressed in a witty and satirical language so enjoyable to read, while at the same time so provocative as to force the reader to think and reflect on the many characters in these essays and stories and their sometimes ludicrous and ineffectual behavior.

In Qian's satirical mode of writing, nothing—whether political power or commercial success, literary fashions or scholarly trends, elite eccentrics or popular beliefs, the Devil or God—nothing is sacred and beyond mockery or derision. Quite appropriately, *Written in the Margins of Life* begins with the Devil paying a nighttime visit to the author's namesake, whereas *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts* starts with a hilarious "God's Dream." The two main stylistic features of Qian's writing—allusions to a wealth of texts and a real flair for wit and satire—are embodied in the two stories as well as the other pieces in this collection. In addition, Qian's writing has a distinct voice that speaks with knowledge and insights, enlivened with a natural sense of humor, dotted with classical references, smart, sophisticated, irreverent, and often self-mocking. For the translator, it becomes quite a challenge to capture the distinct tone of that voice and convey a sense of the stylistic features. By and large, Rea's collection has done a fairly good job in giving readers a faithful translation. The Devil in the first story is actually not so bad a figure, and his sarcastic but brilliant comments on writers of biography and autobiography articulate the author's own views with regard to fiction and imagination, and biography or autobiography as a literary genre. The story mentions many works that feature the Devil, from such classical authors as Dante, Milton, and Goethe to such less well-known works as Maurice Garçon's *Le Diable*, written in collaboration with Jean Vinchon, and Johann Weyer's *De praestigiis daemonum*. The Devil pokes fun at humans, complaining, for example, how the modern world is filled with people with no souls, where even the Devil feels cheated and is almost put out of his "soul-trading" business. He dominates the conversation and talks glibly, making some paradoxical and unexpectedly brilliant remarks on a variety of topics. At the end of the story, the Devil's departure is depicted with a kind of tragic pathos, which is expertly expressed in Rea's translation: "Wishing me a good night, he said that we might have a chance to meet again. I opened the door and saw him out. The boundless darkness of the night awaited him in silence. He stepped outside and melted into it, like a raindrop returning to the sea" (p. 38). At that point, the reader may almost wish to retain the

Devil's presence and have more of his devilish talk, as he is such an interesting fellow, a good conversationalist that you would never get tired of, but would always find irreverent, provocative, and fascinating.

If the Devil appears to be street-wise, God in "God's Dream," on the other hand, seems not so smart, but deceived by his self-centeredness, his narcissistic obsession with himself. Qian's satire is relentless towards creationism as it is towards evolution theory, and the two merge into one in a strange twist. "The Law of Evolution holds that what comes later is superior to what precedes it," says Qian, so God, being "supreme and peerless," must be "the final product of evolution" (p. 94). In Qian's sarcastic portrayal, the sun happened to rise at the moment when God wished to see the world, so he mistook the visibility of all things under the sun as created by his own will. When he closed his eyes, everything vanished into darkness. "By this point, God had no more doubts about his own capacities and powers," and this self-assertiveness is compared to the fabled rooster who "swaggered before his hen and crowed loudly and smugly at the sun because it dared not show its face before his morning report" (p. 95). Unlike a rooster who can boast before a hen, however, God does not have a mate, and that, says Qian, is not an evolutionary flaw, but has a scientific reason: "Like every animal bred through eugenics (like the mule) and every revered dictator (like the uni-testicled Hitler), God could not reproduce and thus had no need for a partner" (p. 95). God created man nonetheless to satisfy his vanity of having someone always to worship him, "tirelessly and indiscriminately, like a rich man's entourage, a bought politician, or a newspaper editor on the take" (p. 96). But once he created man and woman, his trouble also began, and the rest of the story is a hilarious tragic-comedy, a depiction of the absurd human condition worthy of an existentialist's philosophizing, but presented from the perspective of a superb satirist. This and the other stories make very enjoyable reading, and the translation of this collection of Qian Zhongsu's work makes a valuable contribution not only to introduce this important writer's work to readers of English, but also to the study of modern Chinese literature beyond the more familiar canon from Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and the other writers of the May Fourth New Culture Movement.

Generally speaking, the translations in this book are of good quality, though there are occasional errors. For example, in "God's Dream," God is said to have not heard all the prayers made by all kinds of people. Qian's original reads: 這許多虔誠的表示，好比家人寄給流浪者的信，父母生前對於遺腹子的願望，上帝絲毫沒有領略到, which is translated as "these various signs of devotion were like a letter from home to a vagabond or parents' aspirations for a child who has passed away—God was completely oblivious to them" (p. 94). Now 遺腹子, literally "a child left in the womb," means a child born after the father has passed away. Here 父母生前 clearly indicates that it is the parent (here the father) that has passed away, not the child. Another example is the beginning of "On Writers." The original 論文人 can be better translated as "On Men of Letters," and the first sentence reads: 文人是可嘉獎的，因為他虛心，知道上進，並不拿身分，並不安本分, which comes out in translation as "The writer is

commendable for his modesty: while knowing how to get ahead in the world, he refrains from hankering after social position and eschews complacency with his lot" (p. 70). The translation here deviates from the original quite a bit. The original sentence has a rhythm that directly related to the meaning, so the first phrase stands alone: "A man of letters is commendable (文人是可嘉獎的)," and the rest provides two different reasons in two word groups, first, because "he is modest and knows he should improve himself (他虛心，知道上進)," and second, because "he does not put on airs (不拿身分), and he is not content with his current position (不安本分)." That is why, in the following sentences, the man of letters is described as being so very humble and as having such a low opinion of himself. Qian's prose is elegant and not so difficult to understand, but apparently it is not so easy to bring both its form and meaning into good English translation. Hopefully errors like these can be remedied in future, and this book may have a better and carefully revised edition.

Zhang Longxi
City University of Hong Kong

Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History, by Petrus Liu. Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2011. Pp. x + 264. US$49.00 (cloth), $39.00 (paper).

Petrus Liu's study of Chinese martial arts literature, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History*, is quite ambitious, more so than any previous (English-language) study of Chinese martial arts literature. This ambition is due partially to the scope of the materials covered: Liu focuses not on a single author, but rather on the 20th-century history of the genre as a whole. Primarily, however, Liu's ambition is found in his theoretical stance and polemic thrust. Not satisfied with some of the more traditional, humdrum readings of the martial arts novel genre, Liu promises to read the genre as a key to opening up a host of radical theoretical positions. Most notable in this respect is the title of Liu's book, *Stateless Subjects*, which frames the genre not, as is often the case, as the crystallization of Chinese nationalist sentiments, but rather as a utopian vision of an essentially stateless realm. In Liu's vision, martial arts fiction does not serve as a mere commercial byproduct of the nation-state system but rather as one of its most powerful critiques.

Liu first lays the basis for his vision of stateless subjects in the first chapter, a discussion of the founding father of modern martial arts fiction, Pingjiang buxiaosheng (pen-name of Xiang Kairan, 1890-1957). Given that no English language scholarship has been published on Xiang Kairan before, Liu's attention to this author is welcome. As Liu points out, not only did Xiang Kairan's 1923 twin masterworks, *Stateless Heroes of Marvels* (*Jianghu qixia zhuan*) and *Modern Heroes* (*Jindai yingxiong zhuan*), lay the groundwork for much of the martial arts fiction in the century that